

Safe at Home

By Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz
and State Representative Karen Jarmoc (D-59th Assembly District)

It is a sad reality that today in Connecticut there are tens of thousands of victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. By the end of the year, roughly twenty thousand Connecticut residents will report being victims of abuse. By the end of the year in Connecticut, statistics indicate there will be another six hundred victims of rape alone. These victims may be our family members, our friends, their children and countless others who live in quiet fear.

These statistics tell a story that is all too familiar in our state. It is also the story of “Mindy” and her two children. Physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by her partner, “Mindy” and her children fled their home and found refuge in a nearby shelter. The next morning, a counselor met with them to offer critical support and services. As part of their safety plan, the counselor encouraged them to relocate to a new home unknown to their abuser and shared information on the Safe at Home Address Confidentiality Program (ACP).

For those like “Mindy” who are lucky enough to flee their abusers and make a new life, the Office of the Secretary of the State established the Safe at Home program to keep victims’ home addresses confidential from their abuser. Offered to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and risk of injury to a minor, it prevents public access to a participant’s home address on government records such as voter registration lists and marriage certificate records. Safe at Home also provides no-cost, first-class mail forwarding services.

Domestic violence and sexual assault are traumatic experiences for many Connecticut residents with consequences that have a long lasting, if not life long impact. For these victims, physical and emotional recovery, personal safety, and peace of mind depend on having control and preventing further contact with their abuser. For victims, keeping their new home address confidential could also be the difference between life and death.

Laura Cordes, Director of Policy and Advocacy for the Connecticut Sexual Abuse Crisis Services (CONNSACS), Inc., has stressed: “People who survive rape and sexual assault face a long and difficult healing process. Violated and robbed of their personal autonomy and trust, many survivors experience undue shame, blame, and guilt, along with threats from the offender or the offender’s family and friends. Privacy, and the ability to control one’s personal information, is thus fundamental to healing and safety for sexual assault survivors.”

Lisa Holden, Executive Director of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV), Inc., is quick to point out that “adult victims and their children suffer untold emotional damage and physical harm, including death. There’s often a small window of opportunity for them to leave an abusive relationship. The longer the response time, the greater the safety risk.”

Recently, advocacy groups, elected officials, and state agencies gathered to re-launch the Safe at Home program. Through this effort, we hope to raise awareness about this invaluable service

and also increase the number of participants enrolled in the program. Besides renaming the program as “Safe at Home,” we will be distributing materials in English and Spanish to our partners, disseminating information through the media and state agencies, holding regional information meetings, and conducting ongoing training with community groups and others.

Key partners in this effort include CONNSACS and CCADV which provide an array of counseling, safety planning, and advocacy services. Through these two organizations, application assistants are trained to assist participants with their applications before sending them to the Secretary of the State. The participant is then offered a Safe at Home ACP card with a mail forwarding postal address and a unique code. When presented to government agencies, this card shows that the bearer is registered with the program, that correspondence must be sent to the address on the card, and that disclosure of personal information is to be kept confidential.

As “Mindy” said: *“Without this program we would not want mail delivered to us for fear our abuser would find us...This gives me peace of mind, [knowing] that nobody is going to find out where I now live (in peace, not in fear for our lives).”* This program makes a difference and saves lives.

For more information on the Safe at Home ACP, call (860) 509-6200 or go to <http://www.sots.ct.gov>.

Elected in 1998 and now serving her third term, the Honorable Susan Bysiewicz is the 72nd Secretary of the State of Connecticut. State Representative Karen Jarmoc has served as the Executive Director for the Network Against Domestic Abuse, Inc. in Enfield and on the Board of Directors of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence.